

Black Like Mao

Red China and Black Revolution

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This is the era of Mao Tse-Tung, the era of world revolution and the Afro-American's struggle for liberation is a part of an invincible world-wide movement. Chairman Mao was the first world leader to elevate our people's struggle to the fold of the world revolution.

—Robert Williams, 1967

It seems as if Chairman Mao, at least in the symbolic realm, has been enjoying a resurgence in popularity among the youth. His image and ideas consistently turn up in a myriad of cultural and political contexts. The Coup, a popular San Francisco Bay Area hip-hop group, restored Mao Zedong to the pantheon of black radical heroes and in so doing placed

the black freedom struggle in an international context. In a song simply called "Dig It" (1993), the Coup refers to its members as "the wretched of the earth," tells listeners to read *The Communist Manifesto*, and conjures up revolutionary icons such as Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, Kwame Nkrumah, H. Rap Brown, Kenya's Mau Mau movement, and Geronimo Ji Jaga Pratt. In classical Maoist fashion, the group seizes on Mao's most famous quote and makes it its own: "We realize that power [is] nickel plated." Even though members of the Coup were not even born during the heyday of Black Maoism, "Dig It" captures the spirit of Mao in relation to the larger colonial world—a world that included



Political Propaganda of the Chinese Revolution. International Visions & Mao.

African Americans. In Harlem in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it seemed as though everyone had a copy of *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*,¹ better known as the "little red book." From time to time supporters of the Black Panther Party would be seen selling the little red book on street corners as a fund-raiser for the party. And it was not unheard of to see some young black radical strolling down the street dressed like a Chinese peasant—except for the Afro and sunglasses, of course.

Like Africa, China was on the move and there was a general sensibility that the Chinese supported the black struggle. Actually, it was more than a sensibility: There were real-

life black folk calling for revolution in the name of Mao as well as Marx and Lenin. Countless black radicals of that era regarded China, not unlike Cuba or Ghana or even Paris, as the land where true freedom might be had. China was not perfect, but it was much better than living in the belly of the beast. When the Black Panther leader Elaine Brown visited Beijing in the fall of 1970, she was pleasantly surprised by what the Chinese revolution achieved in improving peoples' lives. "Old and young would spontaneously give emotional testimonies, like Baptist converts, to the glories of socialism."² A year later, she returned with one of the Panther founders, Huey Newton, who described his

experience in China as a "sensation of freedom—as if a great weight had been lifted from my soul and I was able to be myself, without defense or pretense or the need for explanation. I felt absolutely free for the first time in my life—completely free among my fellow men."⁵

More than a decade before Brown and Newton set foot on Chinese soil, W.E.B. Du Bois regarded China as the other sleeping giant poised to lead the colored races in the worldwide struggle against imperialism. He had first traveled there in 1936—before the war and the revolution—during an extended visit to the Soviet Union. Returning in 1959, when it was illegal to travel to China, Du Bois discovered a new country. He was struck by the transformation of the Chinese, in particular what he perceived as the emancipation of women, and left convinced that China would lead the underdeveloped nations on the road toward socialism. "China after long centuries," he told an audience of Chinese Communists attending his ninety-first birthday celebration, "has arisen to her feet and leapt forward. Africa arise, and stand straight, speak and think! Act! Turn from the West and your slavery and humiliation for the last 500 years and face the rising sun."⁶

How black radicals came to see China as the beacon of Third World revolution and Mao Zedong thought as the guidepost is a complicated and fascinating story involving literally dozens of organizations and covering much of the world—from the ghettos of North America to the African countryside. The following account, therefore, does not pretend to be comprehensive.⁷ Nevertheless, we have set out in this article to explore the impact that Maoist thought, and the People's

Republic of China more generally, had on black radical movements from the 1950s through at least the mid-1970s. We also explore how radical black nationalism has shaped debates within Maoist or "antirevisionist" organizations in the United States. It is our contention that China offered black radicals a "colored," or Third World, Marxist model that enabled them to challenge a white and Western vision of class struggle—a model they shaped and reshaped to suit their own cultural and political

realities. Although China's role was contradictory and problematic in many respects, the fact that Chinese peasants, as opposed to the European proletariat, made a socialist revolution and carved out a position in world politics distinct from the Soviet and U.S. camps endowed black radicals with a deeper sense of revolutionary importance and power. Finally, Mao not only proved to black folks the world over that they need not wait for "objective conditions" to make revolution, but his elevation of the cultural struggle profoundly shaped debates surrounding black arts and politics.

The Long March

Anyone familiar with Maoism knows that it was never a full-blown ideology meant to replace Marxism-Leninism. On the contrary, if anything, it marked a turn against the "revisionism" of the post-Stalin Soviet model. What Mao did contribute to Marxist thought grew directly out of the Chinese Revolution of 1949. Mao's insistence that the revolutionary capacity of the peasantry was not dependent on the urban proletariat was particularly attractive to black radicals skeptical of the idea that they must wait for the objective con-

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ditions to launch their revolution. Central to Maoism is the idea that Marxism can be (must be) reshaped to the requirements of time and place and that practical work, ideas, and leadership stem from the masses in movement not from a theory created in the abstract or produced out of other struggles.⁸ In practice, this meant that true revolutionaries must possess revolutionary will to win. The notion of revolutionary will cannot be underestimated, especially for those in movements that were isolated and attacked on all sides. Armed with the proper theory, the proper ethical behavior, and the will, revolutionaries, in Mao's words, can "move mountains."⁹ Perhaps this is why the Chinese Communist leader Lin Biao could write in the foreword to the *Quotations*, "Once Mao Tse-Tung's thought is grasped by the broad masses, it becomes an inexhaustible source of strength and a spiritual atom bomb of infinite power."¹⁰

Both Mao and Lin Biao recognized that the source of this "atomic bomb" could be found in the struggles of Third World nationalists. In an age when the Cold War helped usher in the nonaligned movement, with leaders of the "colored" world converging in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955 to try to chart an independent path toward development, the Chinese hoped to lead the former colonies on the road to socialism. The Chinese (backed by Lin Biao's theory of the "new democratic revolution") not only endowed nationalist struggles with revolutionary value, but they reached out specifically to Africa and people of African descent. Two years after the his-

toric Bandung meeting of nonaligned nations, China formed the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization. Mao not only invited W.E.B. Du Bois to spend his ninetieth birthday in China after he had been declared a public enemy by the U.S. state, but three weeks prior to the great March on Washington in 1963, Mao issued a statement criticizing American racism and casting the African-American freedom movement as part of the worldwide struggle against imperialism. "The evil system of colonialism and imperialism," Mao stated, "arose and thrived with the enslavement of Negroes and the trade in Negroes, and it will surely come to its end with the complete emancipation of the black people."¹¹ A decade later, the novelist John Oliver Killens was impressed by the fact that several of his own books, as well as works by other black writers, had been translated into Chinese and were widely read by students. Everywhere he went, it seemed, Killens met young intellectuals and workers "tremendously interested in the Black movement and in how the art and literature of Black folks reflected that movement."¹²

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Their status as people of color served as a powerful political tool in mobilizing support from Africans and African-descended people. In 1963, for example, Chinese delegates in Moshi, Tanzania, proclaimed that the Russians had no business in Africa because they were white. The Chinese, on the other hand, were understood as being not only part of the colored world but also not complicit in the slave trade. Of course, most of these claims serve to facilitate alliance building. The fact is, African slaves could be



"Chairmen Mao." Mixed media image by Zhang Hong tu. Courtesy of the artist.

found in Guangzhou during the twelfth century, and some African students in Communist China complained of racism. (Indeed, after Mao's death, racial clashes on college campuses occurred more frequently, notably in Shanghai in 1979, Nanjing in 1980, and Tianjin in 1986.)¹⁴ Furthermore, Chinese foreign policy toward the black world was driven more by strategic considerations than by a commitment to Third World revolutionary movements, especially after the Sino-Soviet split. China's anti-Soviet position resulted in foreign policy decisions that ulti-

mately undermined its standing with certain African liberation movements. In southern Africa, for example, the Chinese backed movements that also received support from the apartheid regime of South Africa.¹⁴

Yet, Mao's ideas still gained an audience among black radicals. Although Maoist projects in the United States never achieved the kind of following enjoyed by Soviet-identified Communist parties in the 1930s, they did take root in this country. And like a hundred flowers, they bloomed as a confusing mosaic of radical voices all seemingly at war with

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each other. Not surprising, at the center of their debate over the character of class struggle in the United States was the "Negro Question": What role will black folk play in world revolution?

The World Black Revolution

People of the world, unite and defeat the U.S. aggressors and all their running dogs! People of the world be courageous, dare to fight, defy difficulties and advance wave upon wave. Then the whole world will belong to the people. Monsters of all kinds shall be destroyed.

—Mao Tse-Tung,

"Statement Supporting the People of the Congo Against U.S. Aggression" (1964)¹⁶

All over Africa, Asia, South, Afro and Central America a revolution is haunting and sweeping.

—Revolutionary Action Movement,
*The World Black Revolution*¹⁷

Maoism in the United States was not exported from China. If anything, for those Maoists schooled in the Old Left, its source can be found in Khrushchev's revelations at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party Soviet Union in 1956, which prompted an antirevisionist movement throughout the pro-Stalinist left. Out of the debates within the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) emerged several organizations pledging to

push the Communists back into the Stalinist camp, including the Provisional Organizing Committee (POC, 1958), Hammer and Steel (1960), and the Progressive Labor Party (PLP, 1965).¹⁷

The PLP, an outgrowth of the Progressive Labor movement founded three years earlier, was initially led by ex-Communists who believed the Chinese had the correct position. Insisting that black workers were the "key revolutionary force" in the proletarian revolution, the PLP attracted a few outstanding black activists such as John Harris in Los Angeles and Bill Epton in Harlem. Epton had become somewhat of a cause célèbre after he had been arrested for "criminal anarchy" during the 1964 riots.¹⁸ Two years later, the PLP helped organize a student strike to establish a black studies program at San Francisco State University and its Black Liberation Commission published a pamphlet titled *Black Liberation Now!* that attempted to place all of these urban rebellions in a global context. But by 1968, the PLP abandoned its support for "revolutionary" nationalism and concluded that all forms of nationalism are reactionary. As a result of its staunch antinationalism, the PLP opposed affirmative action and black and Latino trade union caucuses—positions that undermined the PLP's relationship with black community activists. In fact, the PLP's connections to the New Left in general were damaged in part because of its attack on the Black Panther Party and the black student movement. PLP members were thrown out of

Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in 1969 with the help of several radical nationalist groups, including the Panthers, the Young Lords, and the Brown Berets.¹⁹

Nevertheless, predominantly white Marxist-Leninist-Maoist parties were not the primary vehicle for the Maoist-inspired black left. Most black radicals of the late 1950s and early 1960s discovered China by way of anti-colonial struggles in Africa and the Cuban Revolution. Ghana's independence in 1957 was cause to celebrate, and the CIA-sponsored assassination of Patrice Lumumba in the Congo inspired protest from all black activist circles. The Cuban Revolution and Fidel Castro's infamous residency at Harlem's Hotel Theresa during his visit to the U.N. brought black people face-to-face with an avowed socialist who extended a hand of solidarity to people of color the world over. Indeed, dozens of black radicals not only publicly defended the Cuban revolution but visited Cuba with groups like the Fair Play for Cuba Committee.²⁰ One of these visitors was Harold Cruse, himself an ex-Communist still committed to Marxism. He believed the Cuban, Chinese, and African revolutions could revitalize radical thought because they demonstrated the revolutionary potential of nationalism. In a provocative essay published in the *New Leader* in 1962, Cruse wrote that the new generation is looking to the former colonial world for its leaders and insights, and among its heroes are Mao:

Already they have a pantheon of modern heroes—Lumumba, Kwame Nkrumah, Sekou Toure in Africa; Fidel Castro in Latin America; Malcolm X, the Muslim leader, in New York; Robert Williams in the South; and Mao Tse-Tung in China. These men seem heroic to the Afro-Americans not because of their political philosophy, but because they were either former colonials who achieved complete independence, or because, like

Malcolm X, they dared to look the white community in the face and say: "We don't think your civilization is worth the effort of any black man to try to integrate into." This to many Afro-Americans is an act of defiance that is truly revolutionary.²¹

In another essay, which appeared in *Studies on the Left* in 1962, Cruse was even more explicit about the global character of revolutionary nationalism. He argued that black people in the United States were living under domestic colonialism and that their struggles must be seen as part of the worldwide anti-colonial movement. "The failure of American Marxists," he wrote, "to understand the bond between the Negro and the colonial peoples of the world has led to their failure to develop theories that would be of value to Negroes in the United States." In his view, the former colonies were the vanguard of the revolution, and at the forefront of this new socialist revolution were Cuba and China.²²

Revolutions in Cuba, Africa, and China had a similar effect on Amiri Baraka, who a decade and a half later would found the Maoist-inspired Revolutionary Communist League (RCL). Touched by his visit to Cuba and the assassination of Lumumba, Baraka began contributing essays to a new magazine called *African Revolution*, edited by the Algerian nationalist leader Ben Bella. As Baraka explained it,

India and China had gotten their formal independence before the coming of the 50s, and by the time the 50s had ended, there were many independent African nations (though with varying degrees of neocolonialism). Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah had hoisted the black star over the statehouse in Accra, and Nkrumah's pronouncements and word of his deeds were glowing encouragement to colored people all over the world. When the Chinese exploded their first A-bomb I wrote

a poem saying, in effect, that *time* for the colored peoples had rebegun.²³

The Ghana-China matrix is perhaps best embodied in the career of Vicki Garvin, a stalwart radical who traveled in Harlem's black left circles during the postwar period. Raised in a black working-class family in New York, Garvin spent her summers working in the garment industry to supplement her family's income. As early as her high school years, she became active in black protest politics, supporting efforts by Adam Clayton Powell Jr. to obtain better paying jobs for African Americans in Harlem and creating black history clubs dedicated to building library resources. After earning her B.A. in political science from Hunter College and M.A. in economics from Smith College in Northampton, she spent the war years working for the National War Labor Board and continued on as an organizer for the United Office and Professional Workers of America (UOPWA)-CIO and national research director and cochair of the Fair Employment Practices Committee. During the postwar purges of the left in the CIO, Garvin was a strong voice of protest and a sharp critic of the CIO's failure to organize in the South. As executive secretary of the New York chapter of the National Negro Labor Council and vice president of the national organization, Garvin established close ties to Malcolm X and helped him arrange part of his tour of Africa.²⁴

Garvin joined the black intellectual exodus to Nkrumah's Ghana, where she initially roomed with the poet Maya Angelou and eventually moved into a house next door to Du Bois. She spent two years in Accra, surrounded by several key black intellectuals and artists, including Julian Mayfield, the artist Tom Feelings, and the cartoonist Ollie Harrington. As a radical who taught conversational English to the Cuban, Algerian, and

Chinese diplomatic core in Ghana, she would have had difficulty *not* developing a deep internationalist outlook. Conversations with Du Bois during his last days in Ghana only reinforced her internationalism and kindled her interest in the Chinese revolution. Indeed, through Du Bois Garvin got a job as a "polisher" for the English translations of the *Peking Review* and a teaching position at the Shanghai Foreign Language Institute. She remained in China from 1964 to 1970, building bridges between the black freedom struggle, African independence movements, and the Chinese Revolution.²⁵

For Huey Newton, a future founder of the Black Panther Party, the African revolution seemed even less crucial than events in Cuba and China. As a student at Merritt College in the early 1960s,

he read a little existentialism, began attending meetings sponsored by the Progressive Labor Party, and supported the Cuban Revolution. Not surprising, Newton began to read Marxist literature voraciously. Mao, in particular, left a lasting impression: "My conversion was complete when I read the four volumes of Mao Tse-Tung to learn more about the Chinese Revolution."²⁶ Thus, well before the founding of the Black Panther Party, Newton was steeped in Mao Zedong thought as well as the writings of Che Guevara and Frantz Fanon. "Mao and Fanon and Guevara all saw clearly that the people had been stripped of their birthright and their dignity, not by a philosophy or mere words, but at gunpoint. They had suffered a holdup by gangsters, and rape; for them, the only way to win freedom was to meet force with force."²⁷



The Chinese and Cubans' willingness "to meet force with force" also made these revolutions attractive to black radicals in the age of nonviolent passive resistance. Of course, the era had its share of armed struggle in the South, with groups like the Deacons for Defense and Justice and Gloria Richardson's Cambridge movement defending nonviolent protesters when necessary. But the figure who best embodied black traditions of armed self-defense was Robert Williams, a hero to the new wave of black internationalists whose importance almost rivaled that of Malcolm X.²⁸ A former U.S. Marine with extensive military training, Williams earned notoriety in 1957 for forming armed self-defense groups in Monroe, North Carolina, to fight the Ku Klux Klan. Two years later, Williams's statement that black people must "meet violence with violence" as the only way to end injustice in an uncivilized South led to his suspension as president of the Monroe Chapter of the NAACP.

Williams's break with the NAACP and his open advocacy of armed self-defense pushed him further left, into the orbit of the Socialist Workers Party, the Workers World Party, and some members of the old CPUSA. By 1961, as a result of trumped-up kidnapping charges and a federal warrant for his arrest, Williams and his family were forced to flee the country and seek political asylum in Cuba. During the next four years, Cuba became Williams's base for promoting black world revolution and elaborating an internationalist ideology that embraced black nationalism and Third World solidarity.

The Revolutionary Action Movement

Williams's flight to Cuba partly inspired the creation of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM). In Ohio around 1961, black members of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) as well as activists in the Student

Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) met in a small group to discuss the significance of Williams's work in Monroe and his subsequent exile. Led by Donald Freeman, a black student at Case Western Reserve in Cleveland, the group's main core consisted of a newly formed organization made up of Central State College students at Wilberforce calling themselves Challenge. Members of Challenge were especially taken with Harold Cruse's essay, "Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American,"²⁹ which was circulated widely among young black militants. Inspired by Cruse's interpretation of the global importance of the black freedom struggle, Freeman hoped to turn Challenge into a revolutionary nationalist movement akin to the Nation of Islam but using the direct action tactics of SNCC. After a lengthy debate, Challenge members decided to dissolve the organization in the spring of 1962 and form the Revolutionary Action Committee (RAM, originally called the "Reform" Action Movement so as not to scare the university administration), with its primary leaders being Freeman, Max Stanford, and Wanda Marshall. A few months later they moved their base to Philadelphia; began publishing a bimonthly paper called *Black America* and a one-page newsletter called *RAM Speaks*; made plans to build a national movement oriented toward revolutionary nationalism, youth organizing, and armed self-defense; and recruited several Philadelphia activists to the group, including Ethel Johnson (who had worked with Robert Williams in Monroe), Stan Daniels, and Playthell Benjamin.³⁰

RAM represented the first serious and sustained attempt in the postwar period to wed Marxism, black nationalism, and Third World internationalism into a coherent revolutionary program. In Max Stanford's view, RAM "attempted to apply Marxism-Leninism Mao Tse-Tung thought" to the conditions of black

Chu



Che Guevara, Havana, Cuba. Photo by Osvaldo Soler/Impact Visuals.

people and "advanced the theory that the Black liberation movement in the U.S. was part of the vanguard of the world socialist revolution."¹ Besides looking to Robert Williams, young RAM militants sought political guidance from a number of black former Communists who had either been expelled for "ultraleftism" or "bourgeois nationalism" or bolted the party because of its "revisionism." Among this group of elders were Harold Cruse, Harry Haywood, Abner Berry, and "Queen Mother" Audley Moore. Moore would go on to become one of RAM's most important mentors on the East Coast, offering members training in black nationalist thought and Marxism. The Queen Mother's home, which she affectionately called Mount Addis Ababa, practically served as a school for a new generation of young black radicals. She

had founded the African-American Party of National Liberation in 1963, which formed a provisional government and elected Robert Williams as premier in exile.² RAM members also turned to Detroit's legendary ex-Trotskyists James and Grace Lee Boggs, former comrades of C.L.R. James, whose Marxist and Pan-Africanist writings greatly influenced RAM members as well as other New Left activists.³

As RAM grew, it developed a following in other parts of the country, though it continued to remain semi-underground and very loosely organized. Much like the African Blood Brotherhood of the 1920s or the group of radical intellectuals who published *Studies on the Left*, RAM made a contribution to the struggle that remained largely at the level of theory rather than practice. In the South,

RAM built a small but significant following at Fisk University, the training ground for many leading SNCC activists. In May 1964, for example, RAM members held the first Afro-American Student Conference on Black Nationalism on Fisk's campus.²⁸ In Northern California, RAM grew primarily out of the Afro-American Association. Founded by Donald Warden in 1962, the Afro-American Association consisted of students from the University of California at Berkeley and Merritt College—many of whom, such as Leslie and Jim Lacy, Cedric Robinson, Ernest Allen, and Huey Newton, would go on to play important roles as radical activists/intellectuals. In Los Angeles, the president of the Afro-American Association was a young man named Ron Everett, who later changed his name to Ron Karenga and went on to found US Organization. The Afro-American Association quickly developed a reputation as a group of militant intellectuals willing to debate anyone. By challenging professors, debating groups such as the Young Socialist Alliance, and giving public lectures on black history and culture, these young men left a deep impression on fellow students as well as the black community. In the East Bay, where the tradition of soapbox speakers had died in the 1930s, except for individual campaigns led by the Communist-led Civil Rights Congress during the early 1950s, the Afro-American Association was walking and talking proof that a vibrant, highly visible militant intellectual culture could exist.

Meanwhile, Progressive Labor (PL) had begun sponsoring trips to Cuba and recruited several radical black students in the East Bay to go along. Among them was Ernest Allen, a U.C. Berkeley transfer from Merritt College who had been forced out of the Afro-American Association. A working-class kid from Oakland, Allen was part of a generation of black radicals whose dissatisfaction with the Civil Rights movement's strategy of nonvio-

lent passive resistance drew them closer to Malcolm X and Third World liberation movements. Not surprising, through his trip to Cuba in 1964 Allen discovered RAM. Allen's travel companions included a contingent of black militants from Detroit: Luke Tripp, Charles ("Mao") Johnson, Charles Simmons, and General Baker. All were members of the student group Uhuru, and all went on to play key roles in the formation of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. Incredibly, Max Stanford was already on the island visiting Robert Williams. When it was time to go back to the states, Allen and the Detroit group were committed to building RAM. Allen stopped in Cleveland to meet with RAM members on his cross-country bus trip back to Oakland. Armed with copies of Robert Williams's *Crusader* magazine and related RAM material, Allen returned to Oakland intent on establishing RAM's presence in the East Bay. Never more than a handful of people—folks such as Isaac Moore, Kenn Freeman (Mamadou Lumumba), Bobby Seale (a future founder of the Black Panther Party), and Doug Allen (Ernie's brother)—the group established a base at Merritt College through the Soul Students Advisory Council. The group's intellectual and cultural presence, however, was broadly felt. Allen, Freeman, and others founded a journal called *Soulbook: The Revolutionary Journal of the Black World*, which published prose and poetry that is best described as left black nationalist in orientation. Freeman, in particular, was highly respected among RAM activists and widely read. He constantly pushed RAM members to think about black struggle in a global context. The editors of *Soulbook* also developed ties with Old Left black radicals, most notably the former Communist Harry Haywood, whose work they published in an early issue.²⁹

Although RAM as a movement never received the glory or publicity bestowed on groups like the Black Panther Party, its influence far exceeded its numbers—not unlike the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB) four decades earlier. Indeed, like the ABB, RAM remained largely an underground organization that devoted more time to agitprop work than actual organizing. Leaders such as Max Stanford identified with the Chinese peasant rebels who led the Communist Party to victory. They seized on Mao's famous line: "The enemy advances, we retreat; the enemy camps, we harass; the enemy tires, we attack; the enemy retreats, we pursue."⁶ And they took Mao quite literally, advocating armed insurrection and drawing inspiration and ideas directly from Robert Williams's theory of guerrilla warfare in the urban United States. RAM leaders actually believed such a war was not only possible but could be won in ninety days. The combination of mass chaos and revolutionary discipline was the key to victory. The fall 1964 issue of *Black America* predicted Armageddon:

Black men and women in the Armed Forces will defect and come over to join the Black Liberation forces. Whites who claim they want to help the revolution will be sent into the white communities to divide them, fight the fascists and frustrate the efforts of the counter-revolutionary forces. Chaos will be everywhere and with the breakdown of mass communications, mutiny will occur in great numbers in all facets of the oppressors' government. The stock market will fall; Wall Street will stop functioning; Washington, D.C. will be torn apart by riots. Officials everywhere will run—run for their lives. The George Lincoln Rockefellers, Kennedys, Vanderbilts, Hunts, Johnsons, Wallaces, Barretts, etc., will be the first to go. The revolution will "strike by night and spare none."
... The Black Revolution will use sabotage

in the cities, knocking out the electrical power first, then transportation and guerrilla warfare in the countryside in the South. With the cities powerless, the oppressor will be helpless.⁷

The revolution was clearly seen as a man's job, since women barely figured in the equation. Indeed, one of the striking facts about the history of the antirevisionist left is how male dominated it remained. Although Wanda Marshall had been one of the founding members of RAM, she did not hold a national leadership post in 1964. Aside from promoting the creation of "women's leagues," the purpose of which would be "to organize black women who work in white homes," RAM remained relatively silent on women's liberation.

RAM's masculinist orientation has a lot to do with the fact that its leaders saw themselves as urban guerrillas, members of an all-black version of Mao's Red Army. Not all RAM members saw themselves this way, but those who did were deeply committed to a set of revolutionary ethics Mao laid down for his own party cadres and members of the People's Army. We see this very clearly in RAM's "Code of Cadres," a set of highly didactic rules of conduct members were expected to live by. Here are some examples:

- A Revolutionary nationalist maintains the highest respect for all authority within the party.
- A Revolutionary nationalist cannot be corrupted by money, honors or any other personal gains.
- A Revolutionary nationalist will unhesitatingly subordinate his personal interest to those of the vanguard [without] hesitation.
- A Revolutionary nationalist will maintain the highest level of morality and will never take as much as a needle or

single piece of thread, from the masses—Brothers and Sisters will maintain the utmost respect for one another and will never misuse or take advantage of one another for personal gain—and will never misinterpret the doctrine of revolutionary nationalism for any reason.³⁵

The similarities with *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* are striking. The last example comes straight out of one of Mao's "Three Main Rules of Discipline," which urges cadres to "not take a single needle or piece of thread from the masses." Selflessness and total commitment to the masses is another theme that dominates the *Quotations*. Again, the comparisons are noteworthy: "At no time and in no circumstances," said Mao, "should a Communist place his personal interests first; he should subordinate them to the interests of the nation and of the masses. Hence, selfishness, slacking, corruption, seeking the limelight, and so on are most contemptible, while selflessness, working with all one's energy, whole-hearted devotion to public duty, and quiet hard work will command respect."³⁶

Maoism's emphasis on revolutionary ethics and moral transformation, in theory at least, resonated with black religious traditions (as well as American Protestantism more generally), and like the Nation of Islam, black Maoists preached self-restraint, order, and discipline. It is quite possible that in the midst of a counterculture that embodied elements of hedonism and drug use, a new wave of student and working-class radicals found Maoist ethics attractive. On his return from China, Robert Williams—in many respects RAM's founding father—insisted that all young black activists "undergo personal and moral transformation. There is a need for a stringent revolutionary code of moral ethics. Revolutionaries are instruments of righteous-

ness."³⁷ For black revolutionaries, the moral and ethical dimension of Mao's thought centered on the notion of personal transformation. It was a familiar lesson, embodied in the lives of Malcolm X and (later) George Jackson: the idea that one possesses the revolutionary will to transform *himself*. (These narratives are almost exclusively male despite the growing number of memoirs by radical black women). Whether or not RAM members lived by the "Code of Cadres," Maoist ethics ultimately served to reinforce Malcolm's status as a revolutionary role model.

RAM's twelve-point program called for the development of freedom schools, national black student organizations, rifle clubs, black farmer cooperatives—not just for economic development but to keep "community and guerrilla forces going for a while"—and a liberation guerrilla army made up of youth and unemployed. RAM placed special emphasis on internationalism, pledging support for national liberation movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America as well as the adoption of "Pan-African socialism." In line with Cruse's seminal essay, "Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American," RAM members saw themselves as colonial subjects fighting a "colonial war at home." As Stanford wrote in an internal document, titled "Projects and Problems of the Revolutionary Movement" (1964), "RAM's position is that the Afro-American is not a citizen of the U.S.A., denied his rights, but rather he is a colonial subject enslaved. This position says that the Black people in the U.S.A. are a captive nation suppressed and that their fight is not for integration into the white community but one of national liberation."³⁸

As colonial subjects with a right to self-determination, RAM saw Afro-America as a de facto member of the nonaligned nations. RAM members even identified themselves as part of the "Bandung world," going so far as to hold a conference in November 1964 in

Nashville called "The Black Revolution's Relationship to the Bandung World." In a 1965 article published in RAM's journal *Black America*, members started to develop a theory of "Bandung Humanism" or "Revolutionary Black Internationalism," which argued that the battle between Western imperialism and the Third World—more than the battle between labor and capital—represented the most fundamental contradiction in our time. They linked the African-American freedom struggle with what was happening in China, Zanzibar, Cuba, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Algeria, and they characterized their work as part of Mao's international strategy of encircling Western capitalist countries and challenging imperialism. After 1966, the term "Bandung Humanism" was dropped entirely and replaced with "Black Internationalism."

Precisely what "Black Internationalism" meant was laid out in an incredibly bold thirty-six-page pamphlet published by RAM in 1966, titled *The World Black Revolution*. Loosely patterned on the *Communist Manifesto*, the pamphlet identified strongly with China against both the capitalist West and the Soviet empire. The "emergence of Revolutionary China began to polarize caste and class contradictions within the world, in both the bourgeoisie [*sic*] imperialist camp and also in the European bourgeois communist-socialist camp."¹² In other words, China was the wedge that sharpened contradictions between colonial peoples and the West. Reject-

ing the idea that socialist revolution will arise in the developed countries of the West, RAM insisted that the only true revolutionary solution is the "dictatorship of the world by the Black Underclass through World Black Revolution." Of course, the authors were not working from today's definitions; RAM used "underclass" to encompass all peoples of color in Asia, Latin American, Africa, and elsewhere; the "Black Underclass" was merely a synonym for the colonial world. China was in a bitter fight to defend its own freedom. Now the rest of the "black" world must follow suit:

The Black Underclass has only one alternative to free itself of colonialism, imperialism, capitalism and neo-colonialism; that is to completely destroy Western (bourgeois) civilization (the cities of the world) through a World Black Revolution and establishing a Revolutionary World Black Dictatorship can bring about the end of exploitation of man by mankind and the new revolutionary world be created.¹³

To coordinate this revolution, RAM called for the creation of a Black International and the creation of a "People's Liberation Army on a world scale."

For all of its strident nationalism, *The World Black Revolution* concludes that black nationalism "is really internationalism." Only by demolishing white nationalism/white

Maoism's emphasis on revolutionary ethics and moral transformation, in theory at least, resonated with black religious traditions (as well as American Protestantism more generally), and like the Nation of Islam, black Maoists preached self-restraint, order, and discipline.

power can liberation be achieved for everyone. Not only will national boundaries be eliminated with the "dictatorship of the Black Underclass," but "the need for nationalism in its aggressive form will be eliminated."⁴⁴ This is a pretty remarkable statement given RAM's social and ideological roots. But rather than representing a unified position, the statement reflects various tensions that persisted throughout RAM's history. On one side were nationalists who felt that revolutionaries should fight for the black nation first and build socialism separate from the rest of the United States. On the other side were socialists like James and Grace Boggs who wanted to know who would rule the "white" nation and what such a presence would mean for black freedom. They also rejected efforts to resurrect the "Black Nation" thesis—the old Communist line that people in black-majority counties of the South (the "black belt") have a right to secede from the union. The Boggses contended that the real source of power lies in the cities, not the rural black belt. In January 1965, James Boggs resigned from his post as Ideological Chairman.

After years as an underground organization, RAM was identified in a series of "exposés" in *Life* magazine⁴⁵ and *Esquire*⁴⁶ as one of the leading extremist groups "plotting a War on 'Whitey.'" The "Peking-backed" group was considered not only armed and dangerous but "impressively well read in revolutionary literature—from Marat and Lenin to Mao, Che Guevara and Frantz Fanon." (The Harlem Branch of the Progressive Labor Party responded to the articles with a pamphlet titled *The Plot Against Black America*, which argued that China was not financing revolution, just setting a revolutionary example by its staunch anti-imperialism. The real causes of black rebellion, the pamphlet insisted, can be found in the conditions of ghetto life.)⁴⁷ Not surprising, these highly

publicized articles were followed by a series of police raids on the homes of RAM members in Philadelphia and New York City. In June 1967, RAM members were rounded up and charged with conspiracy to instigate a riot, poison police officers with potassium cyanide, and assassinate Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young. A year later, under the repressive atmosphere of the FBI's Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO), RAM transformed itself into the Black Liberation Party, or the African American Party of National Liberation. By 1969, RAM had pretty much dissolved, though its members opted to "melt back into the community and infiltrate existing Black organizations," continue to push the twelve-point program, and develop study groups that focused on the "Science of Black Internationalism, and the thought of Chairman Rob [Robert] Williams."⁴⁸

COINTELPRO operations only partly explain the dissolution of RAM. Some of its members moved on to other organizations, such as the Republic of New Africa and the Black Panther Party. But RAM's declining membership and ultimate demise can be partly attributed to strategic errors on its part. Indeed, its members' understanding of the current situation in the ghettos and their specific strategies of mobilization suggest that they were not very good Maoists after all. Mao's insistence on the protracted nature of revolution was not taken to heart; at one point RAM suggested that the war for liberation would probably take only ninety days. And because RAM leaders focused on confronting the state head-on and attacking black leaders they deemed reformists, they failed to build a strong base in black urban communities. Furthermore, despite their staunch internationalism, they did not reach out to other oppressed "nationalities" in the United States. Nevertheless, what RAM and Robert Williams did do was to elevate revolutionary black nationalism to a position of critical theoretical im-

portance for the antirevisionist left in general. They provided an organizational and practical example of what Harold Cruse, Frantz Fanon, and Malcolm X were trying to advance in their writings and speeches. More important, they found theoretical justification for revolutionary black nationalism in Mao Zedong thought, especially after the launching of the Cultural Revolution in China.

Return of the Black Belt

No matter what one may think of the Cultural Revolution, it projected to the world—particularly to those sympathetic to China and to revolutionary movements generally—a vision of society where divisions between the powerful and powerless are blurred, where status and privilege do not necessarily distinguish leaders from the led. The socialists Paul Sweezy and Leo Huberman, editors of the independent socialist journal *Monthly Review*, recognized the huge implications such a revolution had for the urban poor in the United States: "Just imagine what would happen in the United States if a President were to invite the poor in this country, with special emphasis on the blacks in the urban ghettos, to win the war on poverty for themselves, promising them the protection of the army against reprisals!"⁴⁹ Of course, black people in the United States were not regarded by the state as "the people." Their problems were a drain on society and their ungrateful rioting and the proliferation of revolutionary organizations did not elicit much sympathy for the black poor.

For many in the New Left, African Americans were not only "the people" but the most revolutionary sector of the working class. The Cultural Revolution's emphasis on eliminating hierarchies and empowering the oppressed reinforced the idea that black Liberation lay at the heart of the new American Revolution. Mao Zedong himself gave cre-

dence to this view in his widely circulated April 1968 statement "In Support of the Afro-American Struggle Against Violent Repression." The statement was delivered during a massive demonstration in China protesting the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., at which Robert Williams and Vicki Garvin were among the featured speakers. According to Garvin, "millions of Chinese demonstrators" marched in the pouring rain to denounce American racism.⁵⁰ Responding to the rebellions touched off by King's assassination, Mao characterized these urban uprisings as "a new clarion call to all the exploited and oppressed people of the United States to fight against the barbarous rule of the monopoly capitalist class."⁵¹ Even more than his 1963 statement, Mao's words endowed the urban riots with historic importance in the world of revolutionary upheaval.

The Black Panther Party

It was in the context of the urban rebellions that several streams of black radicalism, including RAM, converged and gave birth to the Black Panther Party for Self Defense in Oakland, California. Perhaps the most visible black organization promoting Mao Zedong thought, by some accounts the Panthers were probably the least serious about reading Marxist, Leninist, or Maoist writings and developing a revolutionary ideology. Founded by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, a former RAM member, the party went well beyond the boundaries of Merritt College and recruited the "lumpen proletariat." Much of the rank and file engaged more in sloganeering than anything else, and their Bible was the "little red book."

That the Panthers were, at least in rhetoric and program, Marxist was one of the sources of their dispute with Ron Karenga's US Organization and other groups they derisively dismissed as cultural nationalists. Of course,



Malcolm X, 1963. *Ed Druck/Impact Visuals.*

not only did the Panthers have their own cultural nationalist agenda but the so-called cultural nationalists were not a monolith or uniformly procapitalist. And the divisions between these groups were exacerbated by COINTELPRO. Still, there was a fundamental difference between the Panthers' evolving ideology of socialism and class struggle and that of black nationalist groups, even on the left. As Bobby Seale explained in a March 1969 interview,

We're talking about socialism. The cultural nationalists say that socialism won't do anything for us. There's the contradiction between the old and the new. Black people have no time to practice black racism and the masses of black people do not hate white people just because of the color of their skin. . . . [W]e're not going to go out fool-

ishly and say there is no possibility of aligning with some righteous white revolutionaries, or other poor and oppressed peoples in this country who might come to see the light about the fact that it's the capitalist system they must get rid of.²

How the Panthers arrived at this position and the divisions within the party over their stance is a long and complicated story that we cannot address here. For our purposes, we want to make a few brief points about the party's embrace of Mao Zedong thought and its position vis-à-vis black self-determination. For Huey Newton, whose contribution to the party's ideology rivals that of Eldridge Cleaver and George Jackson, the source of the Panther's Marxism was the Chinese and Cuban revolutions precisely because their analysis grew out of their respective histories

rather than from the pages of *Capital*. The Chinese and Cuban examples, according to Newton, empowered the Panthers to develop their own unique program and to discard theoretical insights from Marx and Lenin that have little or no application to black reality.⁵³ Indeed, Malcolm X clearly exerted a strong ideological influence on the Panthers.

Eldridge Cleaver was a little more explicit about the role of Maoism and the thought of the Korean Communist leader Kim Il Sung in reshaping Marxism-Leninism for the benefit of national liberation struggles of Third World peoples. In a 1968 pamphlet titled, *On the Ideology of the Black Panther Party* (Part I), Cleaver made clear that the Panthers were a Marxist-Leninist party but added that neither Marx, Engels, Lenin, nor any of their contemporary followers offered much insight with regard to understanding and fighting racism. The lesson here was to adopt and alter what was useful and reject what was not. "With the founding of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 1948 and the People's Republic of China in 1949," Cleaver wrote,

something new was interjected into Marxism-Leninism, and it ceased to be just a narrow, exclusively European phenomenon. Comrade Kim Il Sung and Comrade Mao Tse-Tung applied the classical principles of Marxism-Leninism to the conditions of their own countries and thereby made the ideology into something useful for their people. But they rejected that part of the analysis that was not beneficial to them and had only to do with the welfare of Europe.⁵⁴

In Cleaver's view, the sharpest critique of Western Marxism's blindness with regard to race came from Frantz Fanon.

Seeing themselves as part of a global national liberation movement, the Panthers also spoke of the black community as a

colony with an inherent right to self-determination. Yet, unlike many other black or interracial Maoist groups, they never advocated secession or the creation of a separate state. Rather, describing black people as colonial subjects was a way of characterizing the materialist nature of racism; it was more of a metaphor than an analytical concept. Self-determination was understood to mean community control within the urban environment, not necessarily the establishment of a black nation.⁵⁵ In a paper delivered at the Peace and Freedom Party's founding convention in March 1968, Cleaver tried to clarify the relationship between interracial unity in the U.S. revolution and "National Liberation in the Black Colony." He essentially called for a dual approach in which, on the one hand, black and white radicals worked together to create coalitions of revolutionary organizations and develop that political and military machinery that could overthrow capitalism and imperialism. On the other hand, he called for a U.N.-sponsored plebiscite that would allow black people to determine whether they wished to integrate or separate. Such a plebiscite, he argued, would bring clarity to black people on the question of self-determination, just as first-wave independence movements in Africa had to decide whether they wanted to maintain some alterredominion status or achieve complete independence.⁵⁶

Cleaver represented a wing of the party more interested in guerrilla warfare than rebuilding society or doing the hard work of grassroots organizing. The attraction to Mao, Kim Il Sung, Guevara, and for that matter Fanon were their writings on revolutionary violence and people's wars. Many self-styled Panther theoreticians focused so much on developing tactics to sustain the immanent revolution that they skipped over a good deal of Mao's writings. Recognizing the problem, Newton sought to move the party away from

Although China's own history on the woman question is pretty dismal, Mao's dictum that "women hold up half the sky" as well as his brief writings on women's equality and participation in the revolutionary process endowed women's liberation with some revolutionary legitimacy on the left.

an emphasis on guerrilla warfare and violence to a deeper, richer discussion of what the party's vision for the future might entail. Shortly after his release from prison in August 1970, he proposed the creation of an "Ideological Institute" where participants actually read and taught what he regarded as the "classics"—Marx, Mao, and Lenin, as well as Aristotle, Plato, Rousseau, Kant, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. Unfortunately, the Ideological Institute did not amount to much; few party members saw the use of abstract theorizing or the relevance of some of these writings to revolution. The fact that *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* read more or less like a handbook for guerrillas did not help matters much. Even Fanon was read pretty selectively, his chapter "Concerning Violence" being a perpetual favorite among militants. George Jackson contributed to the Panther's theoretical emphasis on war, since much of his own writings, from *Soledad Brother*²⁷ to *Blood in My Eye*,²⁸ drew on Mao primarily to discuss armed resistance under fascism. Efforts to read the works of Marx, Lenin, or Mao beyond issues related to armed rebellion did not always find a willing audience among the Panthers. Sid Lemelle, then a radical activist at California State University in Los Angeles, recalls being in contact with a few Panthers who had joined a study group sponsored by the California Communist League. The reading, which in-

cluded Mao's *Four Essays on Philosophy* and lengthy passages from Lenin's selected works, turned out to be too much and they eventually left the group amid a stormy debate.²⁹

Perhaps the least read section of *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, at least by men, was the five-page chapter on women. At a time when the metaphors for black liberation were increasingly masculinized and black men in the movement not only ignored the struggle for women's liberation but perpetuated gender oppression, even the most Marxist of the black nationalist movements belittled the "woman question." The Black Panther Party was certainly no exception. Indeed, it was during the same historic meeting of the SDS in 1969, where the Panthers invoked Marx, Lenin, and Mao to expel the PLP for its position on the national question, that Panther Minister of Information Rufus Walls gave his infamous speech about the need to have women in the movement because they possessed "pussy power." Clearly a vernacular takeoff from Mao's line that "China's women are a vast reserve of labour power [that] . . . should be tapped in the struggle to build a great socialist country,"³⁰ Walls's statement turned out to be a profoundly antifeminist defense of women's participation.

Although China's own history on the woman question is pretty dismal, Mao's

dictum that "women hold up half the sky" as well as his brief writings on women's equality and participation in the revolutionary process endowed women's liberation with some revolutionary legitimacy on the left. Of course, Maoism did not make the movement: The fact is, women's struggles within the New Left played the most important role in reshaping left movements toward a feminist agenda or at least putting feminism on the table. But for black women in the Panthers suspicious of "white feminism," Mao's language on women's equality provided space within the party to develop an incipient black feminist agenda. As the newly appointed Minister of Information, Panther Elaine Brown announced to a press conference soon after returning from China in 1971, "The Black Panther Party acknowledges the progressive leadership of our Chinese comrades in all areas of revolution. Specifically, we embrace China's correct recognition of the proper status of women as equal to that of men."⁶¹

Even beyond the rhetoric, black women Panthers such as Lynn French, Kathleen Cleaver, Erica Huggins, Akua Njere, and Asata Shakur (formerly Joanne Chesimard) sustained the tradition of carving out free spaces within existing male-dominated organizations to challenge the multiple forms of exploitation black working-class women faced daily. Through the Panther's free breakfast and educational programs, for example, black women devised strategies that, in varying degrees, challenged capitalism, racism, and patriarchy. Some African-American women radicals rose to positions of prominence and sometimes by sheer example contributed toward developing a militant, class-conscious black feminist perspective.

In some instances, the growing strength of a black left feminist perspective, buttressed by certain Maoist slogans on the so-called woman question, shaped future black Maoist

formations. One obvious example is the Black Vanguard Party, another Bay Area Maoist group active in the mid to late 1970s; its publication *Juche!* maintained a consistent socialist-feminist perspective. Michelle Gibbs (also known as Michelle Russell, her married name at the time) promoted a black feminist ideology as a Detroit supporter of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and a member of the Black Workers Congress. A red diaper baby whose father, Ted Gibbs, fought in the Spanish Civil War and who grew up in a household where Paul Robeson and the artist Elizabeth Catlett were occasional guests, Gibbs's black socialist-feminist perspective flowed from her political experience; from the writings of black feminist writers; and from a panoply of radical thinkers ranging from Malcolm, Fanon, and Amílcar Cabral to Marx, Lenin, and Mao.⁶² Conversely, the predominantly white radical feminist organization Redstockings was not only influenced by Mao's writings but modeled itself somewhat on the Black Power movement, particularly the movement's separatist strategies and identification with the Third World.⁶³

Ironically, the Black Panther Party's greatest identification with China occurred at the very moment when China's status among the left began to decline worldwide. Mao's willingness to host President Nixon and China's support of the repressive governments of Pakistan and Sri Lanka left many Maoists in the United States and elsewhere disillusioned. Nevertheless, Newton and Elaine Brown not only visited China on the eve of Nixon's trip but announced that their entry into electoral politics was inspired by China's entry into the United Nations. Newton argued that the Black Panthers' shift toward reformist, electoral politics did not contradict "China's goal of toppling U.S. imperialism nor [was it] an abnegation of revolutionary principles. It was a tactic of socialist revolu-

tion."⁶⁴ Even more incredible was Newton's complete abandonment of black self-determination, which he explained in terms of developments in the world economy. In 1971, he concluded quite presciently that the globalization of capital rendered the idea of national sovereignty obsolete, even among the socialist countries. Thus, black demands for self-determination were no longer relevant; the only viable strategy was global revolution. "Blacks in the U.S. have a special duty to give up any claim to nationhood now more than ever. The U.S. has never been our country; and realistically there's no territory for us to claim. Of all the oppressed people in the world, we are in the best position to inspire global revolution."⁶⁵

In many respects, Newton's position on the national question was closer to Mao's than most of the self-proclaimed Maoist organizations that popped up in the early to late 1970s. Despite his own statements in support of national liberation movements and Lin Biao's "theory of democratic revolutions," Mao did not support independent organizations along nationalist lines. To him, black nationalism looked like ethnic/racial particularism. He was, after all, a Chinese nationalist attempting to unify peasants and proletarians and eliminate ethnic divisions *within his own country*. We might recall his 1957 statement in which he demanded that progressives in China "help unite the people of our various nationalities . . . not divide them."⁶⁶ Thus, although recognizing that racism is a product of colonialism and imperialism, his 1968 statement insisted that the "contradiction between the black masses in the United States and U.S. ruling circles is a class contradiction. . . . The black masses and the masses of white working people in the United States share common interests and have common objectives to struggle for."⁶⁷ In other words, the black struggle is bound to merge with the working class movement and overthrow capitalism.

The Black Nation

On the issue of black liberation, however, most U.S. Maoist organizations founded in the early to mid-1970s took their lead from Stalin, not Mao. Black people in the United States were not simply proletarians in black skin but a nation, or as Stalin put it, "a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture."⁶⁸ Antirevisionist groups that embraced Stalin's definition of a nation, such as the Communist Labor Party (CLP) and the October League, also resurrected the old Communist Party's position that African Americans in the black-belt counties of the South constitute a nation and have a right to secede if they wish. On the other hand, groups like Progressive Labor—once an advocate of "revolutionary nationalism"—moved to a position repudiating all forms of nationalism by the start of the Cultural Revolution.

The CLP was perhaps the most consistent advocate of black self-determination among the antirevisionist movements. Founded in 1968 largely by African Americans and Latinos, the CLP's roots can be traced to the old Provisional Organizing Committee (POC)—itself an outgrowth of the 1956 split in the CPUSA that led to the creation of Hammer and Steel and the Progressive Labor movement. Ravaged by a decade of internal splits, the POC had become a predominantly black and Puerto Rican organization divided between New York and Los Angeles. In 1968, the New York leadership expelled their L.A. comrades for, among other things, refusing to denounce Stalin and Mao. In turn, the L.A. group, largely under the guidance of the veteran black Marxist Nelson Peery, founded the California Communist League that same year and began recruiting young black and Chicano radical workers and intellectuals.

Peery's home in south central Los Angeles had already become somewhat of a hangout for young black radicals after the Watts uprising; he organized informal groups to study history, political economy, and classic works in Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought and entertained all sorts of activists, from Black Panthers to student activists from Cal State Los Angeles and L.A. Community College. The California Communist League subsequently merged with a group of SDS militants calling themselves the Marxist-Leninist Workers Association and formed the Communist League in 1970. Two years later the group changed its name again to the Communist Labor Party.⁹⁹

Except for perhaps Harry Haywood's long essay, "Toward a Revolutionary Position on the Negro Question" (first circulated in 1957 and kept in circulation throughout the 1960s and 1970s),¹⁰⁰ Nelson Peery's pamphlet *The Negro National Colonial Question* (1972) was probably the most widely read defense of black self-determination in Marxist-Leninist-Maoist circles at the time. Peery was sharply criticized for his defense of the term "Negro," a difficult position to maintain in the midst of the Black Power movement. But Peery had a point: National identity was not about color. For him, the Negro nation was a historically evolved, stable community with its own unique culture, language (or rather, dialect), and territory—the black-belt counties and their surrounding areas, or essentially the thirteen states of the Old Confederacy. Because Southern whites shared with African Americans a common territory and by his account a common language and culture, they were also considered part of the "Negro nation." More precisely, Southern whites composed the "Anglo-American minority" within the Negro nation. As evidenced in soul music, spirituals, and rock-and-roll, what emerged in the South, Peery insisted, was a hybrid culture with strong

African roots manifest in the form of slave folktales and female head wraps. Peery cited Jimi Hendrix and Sly and the Family Stone, as well as the white imitators Al Jolson, Elvis Presley, and Tom Jones as examples of a shared culture. He even saw "soul" culture embedded in "the custom of eating pigs' feet, neck bones, black eyed peas, greens, yams, and chitterlings [which] are all associated with the region of the South, particularly the Negro Nation."¹⁰¹

Peery's positioning of Southern whites as part of the Negro nation was a stroke of genius, particularly since one of his intentions was to destabilize racial categories. His commitment to Stalin's definition of a nation weakened his argument, however. At the very moment when mass migration and urbanization depleted the rural South of its black population, Peery insisted that the black belt was the natural homeland of Negroes. He even attempted to prove that a black peasantry and stable rural proletariat still existed in the black belt. Because the land question was the foundation on which his understanding of self-determination was built, he wound up saying very little about the nationalization of industry or socialized production. Thus, he could write in 1972, "the Negro national colonial question can only be solved by a return of the land to the people who have toiled over it for centuries. In the Negro Nation this land redistribution will demand a combination of state farms and cooperative enterprises in order to best meet the needs of the people under the conditions of modern mechanized agriculture."¹⁰²

The Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) (CP[ML]) also promoted a version of the black-belt thesis, which it inherited from its earlier incarnation as the October League. The CP(ML) formed out of a merger between the October League, based mainly in Los Angeles, and the Georgia Communist League in 1972.¹⁰³ Many of its founding members came

out of the Revolutionary Youth Movement II (a faction within SDS), and a handful were Old Left renegades like Harry Haywood and Otis Hyde. Haywood's presence in the CP(ML) is significant, since he is considered one of the architects of the original black-belt thesis formulated at the Sixth Congress of the Communist International in 1928. According to the updated CP(ML) formulation, Afro-Americans had the right to secede "to their historic homeland in the Black Belt South."⁷⁴ But the document added the caveat that recognition of the right of self-determination did not mean the group believed separation was the most appropriate solution. It also introduced the idea of regional autonomy (i.e., that urban concentrations of African Americans can also exercise self-determination in their own communities) and extended the slogan of self-determination to Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and indigenous people in U.S. colonies (Pacific Islands, Hawaii, Alaska, etc.). They were selective as to what sort of nationalist movements they would support, promising to back only revolutionary nationalism as opposed to reactionary nationalism.

The Revolutionary Union, an outgrowth of the Bay Area Revolutionary Union (BARU) founded in 1969 with support from ex-CPUSA members who had visited China, took the position that black people constituted "an oppressed nation of a new type."⁷⁵ Because black people were primarily workers concentrated in urban, industrial areas (what BARU called a "deformed class structure"), the group believed that self-determination should not take the form of secession. Instead, it should be realized through the fight against discrimination, exploitation, and police repression in the urban centers. In 1975, when the Revolutionary Union transformed itself into the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), it continued to embrace the idea that black people constituted a nation of a new type but began to uphold "the right of

Black people to return to claim their homeland."⁷⁶ Not surprising, these two contradictory lines created confusion, compelling RCP leaders to adopt an untenable position of defending the right of self-determination without advocating it. Two years later, they dropped the right of self-determination altogether and, like the PLP, waged war on all forms of "narrow" nationalism.

Unlike any of the Maoist-oriented organizations mentioned above, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL)—founded and led by Amiri Baraka—grew directly out of the cultural nationalist movements of the late 1960s. To understand the shifting positions of the RCL (and its precursors) with regard to black liberation, we need to go back to 1966, when Baraka founded Spirit House in Newark, New Jersey, with the help of local activists as well as folks he had worked with in Harlem's Black Arts Repertory Theater. Although Spirit House artists were involved in local political organizing from the beginning, the police beating of Baraka and several other activists during the Newark uprising in 1967 politicized them even further. They helped organize a Black Power conference in Newark after the uprising that attracted several national black leaders, including Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, Huey P. Newton of the Black Panther Party, and Imari Obadele of the newly formed Republic of New Africa (partly an outgrowth of RAM). Shortly thereafter, Spirit House became the base for the Committee for a Unified Newark (CFUN), a new organization made up of United Brothers, Black Community Defense and Development, and Sisters of Black Culture. In addition to attracting black nationalists, Muslims, and even a few Marxist-Leninist-Maoists, CFUN bore the mark of Ron Karenga's US Organization. CFUN adopted Karenga's version of cultural nationalism and worked closely with him. Although tensions arose between Karenga and some of the Newark activists over his

treatment of women and the overly centralized leadership structure CFUN had imported from the US Organization, the movement continued to grow. In 1970, Baraka renamed CFUN the Congress of African Peoples (CAP), transformed it into a national organization, and at its founding convention broke with Karenga. CAP leaders sharply criticized Karenga's cultural nationalism and passed resolutions that reflected a turn to the left—including a proposal to raise funds to help build the Tanzania-Zambia railroad.⁷⁷

Several factors contributed to Baraka's left turn in this period. One has to do with the painful lesson he learned about the limitations of black "petty bourgeois" politicians. After playing a pivotal role in the 1970 election of Kenneth Gibson, Newark's first black mayor, Baraka witnessed an increase in police repression (including attacks on CAP demonstrators) and a failure on the part of Gibson to deliver what he had promised the African-American community. Feeling betrayed and disillusioned, Baraka broke with Gibson in 1974, though he did not give up entirely on the electoral process. His role in organizing the first National Black Political Assembly in 1972 reinforced in his mind the power of black independent politics and the potential strength of a black united front.⁷⁸

An important influence on Baraka was the CLP East Coast regional coordinator William Watkins. Harlem born and raised, Watkins was among a group of radical black students at Cal State Los Angeles who helped found the Communist League. In 1974, he got to know Baraka. "We'd spend hours in his office," Watkins recalled, "discussing the basics—like surplus value." For about three months, Baraka met regularly with Watkins, who taught him the fundamentals of political economy and tried to expose the limitations of cultural nationalism. These meetings certainly influenced Baraka's leftward turn, but when Watkins and Nelson Peery asked Baraka to join the CLP, he refused. Although

he had come to appreciate Marxism-Leninism—Mao Zedong thought, he was not ready to join a multiracial organization. The black struggle was first and foremost.⁷⁹

It is fitting that the most important source of Baraka's radicalization came out of Africa. Just as his first left turn after 1960 was spurred on by the Cuban Revolution, the struggle in southern Africa prompted his post-1970 turn to the left. The key event was the creation of the African Liberation Support Committee in 1971. It originated with a group of black nationalists led by Owusu Sadaukai, director of Malcolm X Liberation University in Greensboro, North Carolina, who traveled to Mozambique under the aegis of the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO). FRELIMO's president, Samora Machel (who, coincidentally, had been in China the same time as Huey Newton), and other militants persuaded Sadaukai and his colleagues that the most useful role African Americans could play in support of anticolonialism was to challenge U.S. capitalism from within and let the world know the truth about FRELIMO's just war against Portuguese domination.

The African Liberation Support Committee (ALSC) reflected the radical orientation of the liberation movements in Portuguese Africa. On May 27, 1972 (the anniversary of the founding of the Organization of African Unity), the ALSC held the first African Liberation Day (ALD) demonstration, drawing approximately 30,000 protesters in Washington, D.C., alone, and an estimated 30,000 more across the United States. The ALD Coordinating Committee consisted of representatives from several nationalist and black left organizations, including the Youth Organization for Black Unity (YOBUI); the All-African People's Revolutionary Party (AAPRP), headed by Stokely Carmichael [Kwame Toure]; the Pan-African People's Organization; and the Maoist-influenced Black Workers Congress.⁸⁰ Because the ALSC brought together such a

broad range of black activists, it became an arena for debate over the creation of a black radical agenda. Although most ALSC organizers were actively anti-imperialist, the number of black Marxists in leadership positions turned out to be a point of contention. Aside from Sadaukai, who would go on to play a major role in the Maoist-oriented Revolutionary Workers League (RWL), the ALSC's main leaders included Nelson Johnson (future leader in the Communist Workers Party) and Abdul Alkalimat (a brilliant writer and founding member of the Revolutionary Union).

As early as 1973, splits occurred in the ALSC. Internal squabbling and sectarianism proved too much for the ALSC to handle, and Chinese foreign policy struck the final blow. China's support for UNITA during the 1975 Angola civil war and Vice-Premier Li Xian-nian's suggestion that dialogue with white South Africa was better than armed insurrection placed black Maoists in the ALSC in a difficult position. Within three years the ALSC had utterly collapsed, bringing to an inauspicious close perhaps the most dynamic anti-imperialist organization of the decade.

Nevertheless, Baraka's experience in the ALSC profoundly altered his thinking. As he recalls in his autobiography, by the time of the first African Liberation Day demonstration in 1972, he was "going left, I was reading Nkrumah and Cabral and Mao." Within two years he was calling on CAP members to examine "the international revolutionary experience [namely the Russian and Chinese Revolutions] and integrate it with the practice of the Afrikan revolution."¹¹ Their study lists expanded to include works such as Mao Zedong's *Four Essays on Philosophy*, Stalin's *Foundations of Leninism*, and *History of the Communist Party Soviet Union (Short Course)*.¹² By 1976, CAP had dispensed with all vestiges of nationalism, changed its name to the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), and sought to remake itself into a multiracial Marxist-Leninist-Maoist move-

ment. Perhaps as a way to establish its ideological moorings as an antirevisionist movement, the RCL followed in the noble tradition of resurrecting the black-belt thesis. In 1977, the RCL published a paper titled "The Black Nation"¹³ that analyzed black liberation movements from a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist perspective and concluded that black people in the South and in large cities constitute a nation with an inherent right to self-determination. Although rejecting "bourgeois integration," the essay argued that the struggle for black political power was central to the fight for self-determination.

As a dyed-in-the-wool artist with deep roots in the black arts movement, Baraka persistently set his cultural and political sights on the contradictions of black life under capitalism, imperialism, and racism. For Baraka, as for many of the persons discussed here, this was not a simple matter of narrow nationalism. On the contrary, understanding the place of racist oppression and black revolution in the context of capitalism and imperialism was fundamental to the future of humanity. In the tradition of Du Bois, Fanon, and Cruse, Baraka insisted that the black (hence colonial) proletariat is the vanguard of world revolution "not because of some mystic chauvinism but because of our place in objective history. . . . We are the vanguard because we are at the bottom, and when we raise to stand up straight everything stacked upon us topples."¹⁴ Moreover, despite his immersion in Marxist-Leninist-Maoist literature, his own cultural work suggests that he knew, as did most black radicals, that the question of whether black people constituted a nation was not going to be settled through reading Lenin or Stalin or resurrecting M. N. Roy. If it ever could be settled, the battles would take place, for better or for worse, on the terrain of culture. Although the black arts movement was the primary vehicle for black cultural revolution in the United States, it is hard to imagine what that revolution would have

looked like without China. Black radicals seized the Great Proletarian Revolution by the horns and reshaped it in their own image.

The Great (Black) Proletarian Cultural Revolution

There is in fact no such thing as art for art's sake, art that stands above classes, art that is detached from or independent of politics.

—Mao Zedong, "Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art" (May 1942)³⁰

Less than a year into the Cultural Revolution, Robert Williams published an article in the *Crusader* titled "Reconstitute Afro-American Art to Remold Black Souls." Whereas Mao's call for a cultural revolution meant getting rid of the vestiges (cultural and otherwise) of the old order, Williams—not unlike the black arts movement in the United States—was talking about purging black culture of a "slave mentality." Although adopting some of the language of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) manifesto (the "Decision of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party Concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution," published August 12, 1966, in the *Peking Review*), Williams sought in his essay to build on the *idea* rather than on the *ideology* of the Cultural Revolution. Like Mao, he called on black artists to cast off the shackles of the old traditions and only make art in the service of revolution:

The Afro-American artist must make a resolute and conscious effort to reconstitute our art forms to remold new proud black and revolutionary soul. . . . It must create a new theory and direction and prepare our people for a more bitter, bloody and protracted struggle against racist tyranny and exploitation. Black art must serve the best interest of black people. It must become a powerful weapon in the arsenal of the Black Revolution.³¹

RAM leaders concurred. An internal RAM document circulated in 1967, titled *Some Questions Concerning the Present Period*, called for a full-scale black cultural revolution in the United States, the purpose of which would be to destroy the conditioned white oppressive mores, attitudes, ways, customs, philosophies, habits, and so on. This meant a new revolutionary culture. It also meant an end to processed hair, skin lighteners, and other vestiges of the dominant culture. Indeed, the revolution targeted not only assimilated bourgeois Negroes but barbers and beauticians.

The conscious promotion of art as a weapon in black liberation is nothing new; we can go back at least to the left wing of the Harlem Renaissance, if not earlier. And the black arts movement in the United States, not to mention virtually every contemporary national liberation movement, took this idea very seriously. Fanon says as much in *The Wretched of the Earth*, the English translation of which was making the rounds like wildfire during this period.³² Still, the Cultural Revolution in China loomed large. After all, many if not most black nationalists were familiar with China and had read Mao, and even if they did not acknowledge or make explicit the influence of Maoist ideas on the need for revolutionary art or the protracted nature of cultural revolution, the parallels are striking nonetheless. Consider Ron [Maulana] Karenga's 1968 manifesto, "Black Cultural Nationalism." First published in *Negro Digest*, the essay derived many of its ideas from Mao's "Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art." Like Mao, Karenga insisted that all art must be judged by two criteria—"artistic" and "social" ("political"); that revolutionary art must be for the masses; and that, in Karenga's own words, art "must be functional, that is useful, as we cannot accept the false doctrine of 'art for art's sake.'" One can definitely see the influence of Maoism on Karenga's efforts to create an alternative revolutionary culture. Indeed, the seven principles

of Kwanzaa (the African-American holiday Karenga invented and first celebrated in 1967), namely unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, collective economics (socialism), creativity, purpose, and even faith, are about as consonant with Mao's ideas as with "traditional" African culture.⁸⁸ And it is not a coincidence, perhaps, that these seven principles were the basis of Tanzania's famous Arusha Declaration in 1964 under President Julius Nyerere—Tanzania being China's earliest and most important ally in Africa.

Although Karenga's debt to Mao went unacknowledged, the Progressive Labor Party took note. The PLP's newspaper, *The Challenge*, ran a scathing attack on the whole black arts movement and its theoreticians, titled "[LeRoi] Jones-Karenga Hustle: Cultural 'Rebels' Foul Us Up," which characterized Karenga as a "pseudo-intellectual" who "has thoroughly read Mao's Talks on Literature and Art. 'Cultural nationalism,'" the article continues, "is not only worshipping the most reactionary aspects of African history. It even goes so far as measuring one's revolutionary commitment by the clothes that are being worn! This is part of the 'Black awareness.'"⁸⁹

Of course, revolution did become a kind of art, or more precisely, a distinct style. Whether it was Afros and dashikis or leather jackets and berets, most black revolutionaries in the United States developed their own aesthetic criteria. In the publishing world, Mao's "little red book" made a tremendous impact on literary styles in black radical circles. The idea that a pocket-sized book of pithy quotes and aphorisms could address a range of subjects, including ethical behavior, revolutionary thought and practice, economic development, and philosophy, appealed to many black activists, irrespective of political allegiance. The "little red book" prompted a cottage industry of miniature books of quotations compiled expressly for black militants.

The Black Book, edited by Earl Ofari Hutchinson (with assistance from Judy Davis) is a case in point.⁹⁰ Published by the Radical Education Project (circa 1970), *The Black Book* includes a compilation of brief quotes from W.E.B. Du Bois, Malcolm X, and Frantz Fanon that address a range of issues related to domestic and world revolution. The resemblance to *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* is striking: Chapter titles include "Black Culture and Art," "Politics," "Imperialism," "Socialism," "Capitalism," "Youth," "The Third World," "Africa," "On America," and "Black Unity." Ofari's introduction placed black struggle in a global context and called for revolutionary ethics and "spiritual as well as physical unification of the Third World." "True blackness," he added, "is a collective life-style, a collective set of values and a common world perspective" that grows out of our distinct experiences in the West. *The Black Book* was not written as a defense of black nationalism against the encroachments of Maoism. On the contrary, Ofari closed by telling "freedom fighters everywhere, continue to read your red book, but place alongside of it the revolutionary BLACK BOOK. To win the coming battle, both are necessary."

Another popular text in this tradition was the *Axioms of Kwame Nkrumah: Freedom Fighters Edition*, which appeared in 1969—a year after China's Foreign Languages Press put out the first English edition of *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*.⁹¹ Bound in black leather with gold type, it opens with a line in the frontispiece underscoring the importance of revolutionary will: "The secret of life is to have no fear." And with the exception of its African focus, the chapters were virtually indistinguishable from the "little red book." Topics included "African Revolution," "Army," "Black Power," "Capitalism," "Imperialism," "People's Militia," "The People," "Propaganda," "Socialism," and "Women." Most of the quotes are vague or fail to



Political Art. Photo by Antonio Garcia.

transcend obvious sloganeering ("The foulest intellectual rubbish ever invented by man is that of racial superiority and inferiority," or "A revolutionary fails only if he surrenders.")⁹² Many of Nkrumah's insights, however, could have come straight from Mao's pen, particularly those quotations dealing with the need for popular mobilization, the dialectical relationship between thought and action, and issues related to war and peace and imperialism.

On the question of culture, most Maoist and antirevisionist groups in the United States were less concerned with creating a new, revolutionary culture than with destroying the vestiges of the old or attacking what they regarded as a retrograde, bourgeois commercial culture. In this respect, they were in step with the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. In a fascinating review of the film *Superfly* published in the CP (ML) newspaper *The Call*, the writer seized the opportunity to criticize the counterculture's as well as the

capitalists' role in promoting drug use in the black community. "Looking around at all the people overdosing on drugs, getting killed in gun fights among themselves, and getting shredded up in industrial accidents while stoned on the job, it's clear that dope is as big a killer as any armed cop." Why would a film marketed to black people glorify the drug culture? Because "the imperialists know the plain truth—if you're hooked on dope, you won't have time to think about revolution—you're too busy worrying about where the next shot is coming from!" The review also introduced a bit of Chinese history:

The British did everything they could to get the Chinese people strung out [on opium]. It was common for workers to get part of their wages in opium, turning them into addicts even quicker. It was only revolution that got rid of the cause of this misery. By taking their countries back, and turning their society

into one that really served the people, there was no more need to escape into drugs.⁹³

Maoist attacks were not limited to the most reactionary aspects of mass commercial culture. The black arts movement—a movement that, ironically, included figures very much inspired by developments in China and Cuba—came under intense scrutiny by the antirevisionist left. Groups like the PLP and the CP (ML), despite their many disagreements over the national question, did agree that the black arts movement and its attraction to African culture was misguided, if not downright counterrevolutionary. The PLP dismissed black cultural nationalists as petty bourgeois businessmen who sold the most retrograde aspects of African culture to the masses and “exploit[ed] Black women—all in the name of ‘African culture’ and in the name of ‘revolution.’” The same PLP editorial castigated the black arts movement for “teaching about African Kings and Queens, African ‘empires.’ There is no class approach—no notice that these Kings, etc., were oppressing the mass of African people.”⁹⁴ Likewise, a 1973 editorial in *The Call* sharply criticized the black arts movement for “delegitimizing the genuine national aspirations of Black people in the U.S. and . . . substituting African counter-culture for anti-imperialist struggle.”⁹⁵

Although these attacks were generally unfair, particularly in the way they lumped together a wide array of artists, a handful of black artists had come to similar conclusions about the direction of the black arts movement. For the novelist John Oliver Killens, the Chinese Cultural Revolution offered a model for transforming black cultural nationalism into a revolutionary force. As a result of his travels to China during the early 1970s, Killens published an important essay in *The Black World* praising the Cultural Revolution for being, in his view, a stunning success. In

fact, he ostensibly went to China to find out why the Chinese revolution succeeded “while our own Black cultural revolution, that bloomed so brightly during the Sixties, seems to be dying on the vine?”⁹⁶ By the time he was ready to return to the United States, he had reached several conclusions regarding the limitations of the black cultural revolution and the strength of the Maoist model. First, he recognized that all successful revolutions must be continuous—permanent and protracted. Second, cultural activism and political activism are not two different strategies for liberation but two sides of the same coin. The cultural revolution and the political revolution go hand in hand. Third, a revolutionary movement must be self-reliant; it must create self-sustaining cultural institutions. Of course, most radical nationalists in the black arts movement figured most of this out independently and Killens’s article merely reinforced these lessons. But China taught Killens one other lesson that few male movement activists paid attention to at the time: “Women hold up one-half of the world.” “In some very vital and militant factions of the Black cultural revolution, women were required to metaphorically ‘sit in the back of the bus.’ . . . This is backward thinking and divisive. Many women voted with their feet and went into Women’s Lib. And some of the brothers seemed upset and surprised. We drove them to it.”⁹⁷

The other major black critic of the black arts movement’s cultural nationalism who ended up embracing Maoism was Amiri Baraka, himself a central figure in the black cultural revolution and an early target for Maoist abuse. As the founder and leader of CAP and later the RCL, Baraka offered more than a critique; he built a movement that attempted to synthesize the stylistic and aesthetic innovations of the black arts movement with Marxism–Leninism–Mao Zedong thought and practice. Just as Baraka’s odyssey from the world

of the Beats to the Bandung world provides insight into Mao's impact on black radicalism in the United States, so does Baraka's transition from a cultural nationalist to committed Communist. More than any other Maoist or antirevisionist, Baraka and the RCL epitomized the most conscious and sustained effort to bring the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution to the inner cities of the United States and to transform it in a manner that spoke to the black working class.

Having come out of the black arts movement in Harlem and Spirit House in Newark, Baraka was above all else a cultural worker. As he and the Congress of African Peoples moved from cultural nationalism to Marxism, this profound ideological shift manifested itself through changes in cultural practice. Dismissing the "Black petty bourgeois primitive cultural nationalist" as unscientific and metaphysical, Baraka warned his comrades against "the cultural bias that might make us think that we can return to pre-slave trade Afrika, and the romance of feudalism."⁹⁸ CAP changed the name of its publication from *Black Newark* to *Unity and Struggle* to reflect its transition from a cultural nationalist perspective to a deeper understanding of "the dialectical requirements of revolution."⁹⁹ The Spirit House Movers (the organization's theater troupe) were now called the Afrikan Revolutionary Movers (ARM), and a group of cultural workers associated with Spirit House formed a singing group called the Anti-Imperialist Singers. They abandoned African dress as well as "male chauvinist practices that had been carried out as part of its 'African traditionalism' such as holding separate political education classes for men and women."¹⁰⁰ And CAP's official holiday, known as "Leo Baraka" for Baraka's birthday, became a day devoted entirely to studying Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought, the "woman question," and the problems of cadre development.¹⁰¹

By 1976, the year CAP reemerged as the Revolutionary Communist League, Baraka had come a long way since his alliance with Ron Karenga. In a poem in his collection *Hard Facts* titled "Today," Baraka's position on cultural nationalism vis-à-vis class struggle is unequivocal:

*Frauds in leopard skin, turbaned
hustlers w/skin
type rackets, colored capitalists, negro
exploiters, Afro-American Embassy
gamers
who lurk about Afrikan embassies
fightin' for
airline tickets, reception guerrillas,
whose
only connection w/a party is the Frankie
Crocker kind.
Where is the revolution brothers and
sisters?
Where is the mobilization of the
masses led
by the advanced section of the working
class?
Where is the unity criticism unity.
The self criticism
& criticism? Where is the work &
study. The
ideological clarity? Why only poses &
postures & subjective one sided non-
theories
describing only yr petty bourgeois
upbringing
Black saying might get you a lecture
gig, "wise
man." but will not alone bring
revolution.¹⁰²*

One might argue that *Hard Facts* was written as a kind of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist manifesto on revolutionary art. Like his former mentor Ron Karenga, Baraka built on Mao's oft-cited "Talks at the Yen'an Forum on Art and Literature," though to very different ends. In

his introduction to the book Baraka insists that revolutionary artists must study Marxism-Leninism; produce work that serves the people, not the exploiters; jettison petty bourgeois attitudes and learn from the people, taking ideas and experiences and reformulating them through Marxism-Leninism. No artist, he asserts, is above study or should produce his or her opinions unconnected to the struggle for socialism. As Mao put it, "Through the creative labour of revolutionary artists and writers the raw material of art and literature in the life of the people becomes art and literature in an ideological form in the service of the people."¹⁰⁸

Baraka tried to put this manifesto in practice through intense community-based cultural work. One of the RCL's most successful projects was the Anti-Imperialist Cultural Union (AICU), a New York-based multinational cultural workers' organization founded in the late 1970s. In November 1978, the AICU sponsored the Festival of People's Culture, which drew some five hundred people to listen to poetry read by Askia Toure, Miguel Algarin, and Sylvia Jones and musical performances by an RCL-created group calling itself the Proletarian Ensemble. Through groups like the Proletarian Ensemble and the Advanced Workers (another musical ensemble formed by the RCL), RCL spread its message of proletarian revolution and black self-determination and its critique of capitalism to community groups and schoolchildren throughout black Newark, New York, and other cities on the Eastern seaboard.

Theater seemed to be Baraka's main avenue for the Black Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Among the AICU's many projects, the Yenian Theater Workshop clearly projected Mao's vision of revolutionary art. The Yenian Theater produced a number of Baraka's plays, including a memorable performance of *What Was the Lone Ranger's Relationship to the Means of Production?* In 1975 to 1976, Baraka wrote two new plays, *The Motion of*

History and *S-1*, that perhaps represent the clearest expression of his shift, in his words, "from petty bourgeois radicalism (and its low point of bourgeois cultural nationalism) on through to finally grasping the science of revolution, Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tse-Tung Thought."¹⁰⁹

The Motion of History is a long epic play that touches on just about everything under the sun, from slavery and slave revolts, industrial capitalism, civil rights and Black Power, to Irish immigration and white racism. And practically every revolutionary or reformist having something to do with the struggle for black freedom makes an appearance, including John Brown, H. Rap Brown, Lenin, Karenga, Harriet Tubman, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner. Through scenes of workers discussing politics on the shop floor or in Marxist study groups, the audience learns about the history of slavery, the rise of industrial capitalism, imperialism, surplus value, relative overproduction, and the day-to-day racist brutality to which African Americans and Latinos are subjected. In the spirit of proletarian literature, *The Motion of History* closes on an upbeat with a rousing meeting at which those present pledge their commitment to building a revolutionary multiracial, multiethnic, working-class party based on Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong thought.

S-1 shares many similarities with *The Motion of History*, although it focuses primarily on what Baraka and the RCL saw as the rise of fascism in the United States. A play about a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist group fighting anti-secession legislation, it was written by Baraka in response to the Senate bill Criminal Justice Codification, Revision and Reform Act, known as S-1, which would enable the state to adopt extremely repressive measures to combat radical movements. S-1 gave police and the FBI greater freedom to search and seize materials from radical groups, as well as permission to wiretap suspects for forty-eight hours without court approval; it proposed

mandatory executions for certain crimes; and it revived the Smith Act, subjecting any group or person advocating the "destruction of the government" to a possible fifteen-year prison sentence and fines up to \$100,000. The most notorious aspect of the bill was the "Leading a Riot" provision, which allowed courts to sentence anyone promoting the assembly of five people with the intention of creating "a grave danger to Property" to three years in prison and a \$100,000 fine.¹⁰⁵

We do not know how activists and working people responded to Baraka's plays during the ultra-radical period of the AUCU and the RCL, and most cultural critics act as if these works are not worthy of comment. No matter what one might think about these works as art, as propaganda, or as both, it is remarkable to think that in the late 1970s a handful of inner-city kids in Newark could watch performances that advocated revolution in the United States and tried to expose the rapaciousness of capitalism. And all this was going on in the midst of the so-called me generation, when allegedly there was no radical left to speak of. (Indeed, Reagan's election in 1980 is cited as evidence of the lack of a left political challenge as well as the reason for the brief resurrection of Marxist parties in the United States between 1980 and 1985.)

Farewell for Mao, the Party's Over?

Depending on where you stand politically, and with whom, you could easily conclude that U.S. Maoism died when Mao did in 1976. But to say that Maoism somehow died on the vine is to overstate the case. Maoist organizations still exist in the United States. The Maoist Internationalist Movement maintains a web site, as does the Progressive Labor Party (though it can hardly be called "Maoist" today), and the RCP is as ubiquitous as ever. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that the RCP played a role in help-

ing to draft the Bloods and Crips' post-L.A. rebellion manifesto, "Give Us the Hammer and the Nails and We Will Rebuild the City." The former CLP, now called the League of Revolutionaries, has a strong following in Chicago and includes the longtime radicals General Baker and Abdul Alkalimat. More important, even if we acknowledge that their numbers have dwindled substantially since the mid-1970s, the activists who stayed in those movements remained committed to black liberation, even if their strategies and tactics proved insensitive or wrongheaded. Anyone who knows anything about politics knows that Jesse Jackson's 1984 presidential campaign was overrun by a rainbow coalition of Maoists and that a variety of Maoist organizations were represented in the National Black Independent Political Party. In other words, now that so many American liberals are joining the backlash against poor black people and affirmative action, either by their active participation or by their silence, some of these self-proclaimed revolutionaries are still willing to "move mountains" in the service of black folk. The most tragic and heroic example comes from Greensboro, North Carolina, where five members of the Communist Workers Party (formerly the Workers Viewpoint Organization) were murdered by Klansmen and Nazis during an anti-Klan demonstration on November 3, 1979.

The fact remains, however, that the heyday of black Maoism has passed. The reasons are varied, having to do with the overall decline of black radicalism, the self-destructive nature of sectarian politics, and China's disastrous foreign policy decisions vis-à-vis Africa and the Third World. Besides, most of the self-described black Maoists in our story—at least the most honest ones—probably owe their greatest intellectual debt to Du Bois, Fanon, Malcolm X, Guevara, and Cruse. But Mao Zedong and the Chinese Revolution left an indelible imprint on black radical politics—an imprint whose impact we have only begun to



Worker, Peasant, and Soldier. "The People's Art"—Chinese Revolution

explore in this article. At a moment when a group of nonaligned countries sought to challenge the political binaries created by Cold War politics, when African nationalists tried to plan for a postcolonial future, when Fidel Castro and a handful of fatigue-clad militants did the impossible, when Southern lunch counters and Northern ghettos became theaters for a

new revolution, there stood China—the most powerful "colored" nation on earth.

Mao's China, along with the Cuban Revolution and African nationalism, internationalized the black revolution in profound ways. Mao gave black radicals a non-Western model of Marxism that placed greater emphasis on local conditions and historical

circumstances than canonical texts. China's Great Leap Forward challenged the idea that the march to socialism must take place in stages or that one must wait patiently for the proper objective conditions to move ahead. For many young radicals schooled in student-based social democracy, in antiracist politics, in feminism, or in all of these, "consciousness raising" in the Maoist style of criticism/self-criticism was a powerful alternative to bourgeois democracy. But consciousness raising was more than propaganda work; it was intellectual labor in the context of revolutionary practice. "All genuine knowledge originates in direct experience," Mao said in his widely read essay "On Practice" (1937).¹⁰⁰ The idea that knowledge derives from a dialectics of practice and theory empowered radicals to question the expertise of sociologists, psychologists, economists, and others whose grand pronouncements on the causes of poverty and racism often went unchallenged. Thus, in an age of liberal technocrats, Maoists—from black radical circles to the women's liberation movement—sought to overturn bourgeois notions of expertise. They developed analyses; debated; and published journals, newspapers, position papers, pamphlets, and even books, and although they rarely agreed with one another, they saw themselves as producers of new knowledge. They believed, as Mao put it, that "these ideas turn into a material force which changes society and changes the world."¹⁰¹

Ideas alone do not change the world, however. People do. And having the willingness and energy to change the world requires more than the correct analysis and direct engagement with the masses: It takes faith and will. Here Maoists have much in common with some very old black biblical traditions. After all, if little David can take Goliath with just a slingshot, certainly a "single spark can start a prairie fire."¹⁰²

Notes

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1. *Crusader* 9, no. 1, July 1967, p. 1.
2. The Coup, "Dig It," *Kill My Landlord* (Wild Pitch Records, 1993).
3. Mao Tse-Tung, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1966).
4. Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Freedom* (New York: Doubleday Books, 1992), 231–232.
5. Huey Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973), 110.
6. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (New York: International Publishers, 1968), 404.
7. In fact, several organizations (e.g., Ray O. Light, the Communist Workers Party, the Black Vanguard Party, the Maoist Internationalist Movement, ad infinitum) are only mentioned in passing or omitted altogether for lack of information. We recognize that only a book can do justice to this story.
8. A. Belden Fields, *Traszyism and Maoism: Theory and Practice in France and the United States* (New York: Praeger, 1988), 16–19.
9. The allegory in *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains," instilled a missionary zeal in many radicals that enabled them to jump quickly to the question of guerrilla war, as if revolution were imminent. Of course, chapters of the "little red book" such as "People's War," "The People's Army," "Education and the Training of Troops," and "Revolutionary Heroism" certainly helped promote the idea that "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun," despite the fact that efforts to apply China's experience to the United States contradicts Mao's own argument that each revolution must grow out of its own specific circumstances.
10. Mao Tse-Tung, *Quotations*, iv.
11. Mao Tse-Tung, *Statement Supporting the American Negroes in Their Just Struggle Against Racial Discrimination in the United States* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1963), 2.
12. John Oliver Killens, *Black Man in the New China* (Los Angeles: U.S.-China People's Friendship Association, 1976), 10.
13. Philip Snow, "China and Africa: Consensus and Camouflage," in *Chinese Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice*, Thomas W. Robinson and David Shambaugh,

eds. (New York and Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1994), 285-299.

14. Fields, *Trotskyism and Maoism*, p. 213. Silber criticized Chinese policy in Angola where the Chinese were on the same side as the South African apartheid regime and the United States. Chinese foreign policy was a hindrance to American Maoists in a variety of contexts, not just southern Africa: China's reception of Nixon while U.S. bombs still dropped on Vietnam and support for Pinochet in Chile are two particularly striking examples.

15. Mao Tse-Tung, *Quotations*, p. 82.

16. Revolutionary Action Movement, *The World Black Revolution*, pamphlet, 1966.

17. Vertical files on the Provisional Organizing Committee, Hammer and Steel, and the Progressive Labor Party, Tamiment Collection, Bobst Library, New York University.

18. Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka* (New York: Freundlich Books, 1984), 220. Also, Fields, *Trotskyism and Maoism*, p. 185.

19. Fields, *Trotskyism and Maoism*, pp. 185-197. Also, Jim O'Brien, *American Leninism in the 1970s* (Somerville, MA: New England Free Press, n.d.).

20. Van Gosse, *Where the Boys Are: Cuba, Cold War America and the Making of a New Left* (London: Verso, 1993), 147-148.

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